

End Slavery in the Coal Fields!



Drawn by Clive Weed

OPERATORS: The trouble with you people is,
you want the earth.
MINERS: The trouble with you is, you've got it!

Private Ownership of Coal Mines Brings Chaos, Tyranny and Hunger

By

Powers Hapgood

Coal miners throughout this country are facing a crisis. Wage reductions, slack work, misery, starvation of body and soul, are the conditions everywhere in the coal fields today.

It is hardly necessary to describe to miners how tragic their conditions have become since the collapse of their once powerful union in the bituminous industry.

For years the miners have been struggling for decent conditions. We and our brothers have been attacked in ways illegal, murderous, and un-American. Against our law abiding brothers have been used injunctions, yellow-dog contracts, evictions, operators' gunmen and coal and iron police; that is, state police controlled by corporations, who take away our constitutional rights by preventing free speech and picketing.

How the Profit System Swindles the Miner

We have not forgotten Ludlow, when the owners' agents shot down and burned our women and children. In Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and other coal fields the killing of our brothers goes on almost continuously, sometimes by operators' agents, sometimes by public officials, but always paid for out of the profits of the coal we mine. By the deaths and accidents in the mines each year we have paid the high cost of private ownership. "If blood be the price of their legal wealth, good God, we have paid in full."

Wages are as low as thirty cents a ton for miners, and three dollars for a day of ten or twelve or even more hours for day men. Most of the coal diggers have no union checkweighman, so that it is a common thing to have half a ton or more stolen from them on each car. At mines where the average weight used to be 4400 lbs. on each car when there was a checkweighman, today, under non-union conditions, the weight is only around 3000.

There is no pit committee to speak to in case a miner has a grievance. To voice a complaint is to lose your job. It is not unusual to see women standing at the pit-heads, each waiting for a car to come up with her husband's check on it, so that she can get a slip from the weigh boss and go to the company store to get enough food for supper. In order to hold their pitiful jobs, it is often necessary for the miners to deal only at company stores. This is causing failure after failure on the part of small retailers in these communities. Their lot is becoming just as miserable and insecure as the fate of the poverty-stricken miners.

All classes of people in mining communities are suffering from the intolerable conditions in the coal industry. They are all asking the question: "What can we do to better ourselves and our families—to get even the barest necessities of life for our wives and children?"

Nationalization The Way Out

One of the answers to this question, of course, is organization. Coal miners must have a strong, militant, honestly-led union that will give them the power to command decent conditions.

But even a real union will not be enough. The fundamental cause of low wages, poverty, and unemployment in the coal industry, as in all other industries today, is Private Ownership.

Economists today agree that we cannot have prosperity unless the workers, who form the great mass of the population, receive back as wages enough money to buy what they produce. Excess production, going back into business as "capital" to produce more excess production, causes business stagnation which forces shut-downs and causes unemployment.

As long as owners take more in profits than they can possibly consume, and more than is required for new investments actually demanded by industry, they make it impossible by that much for the people to buy back what they have produced.

Because the passion for profits is an essential part of private ownership, and because profits cause unemployment, there is only one possible way for the sick industries of this country to get well, and that is through public ownership of industry. That is what we mean by NATIONALIZATION.

The coal miners' only hope is the ownership of the mines by the government and the production of coal for use and not for profit.

Government Ownership Would Help Workers

Why will the conditions of the miners be better under government ownership than under private ownership?

In the first place the government will not suffer from the cut-throat competition which causes one private operator to reduce wages when his competitor cuts his employees. There will necessarily be a national basic wage scale, with wages as the first charge against the industry. Because it will not be necessary to make profits, wages can be far higher under nationalization.

In the second place, there will be a shorter work day to solve the problems created by the new labor-saving machinery and methods of mining. A six hour day and five day week will produce all the coal the country can consume, so under nationalization no set of workers will be allowed to work longer hours than this. Moreover wages will be just as high for six hours as for eight or ten. If just as much coal is produced

there is just as much wealth being created in a shorter time, and the industry can pay just as much for a shorter work day.

In the third place, mining coal will be less dangerous under nationalization. Most accidents are caused by the desire of management to reduce costs. Many private owners oppose safety devices. They violate even the conservative safety laws that are now on the books. The coal industry of this country kills over 2000 miners a year and injures tens of thousands more. Under nationalization, there would not be the competitive necessity of keeping costs of mining down to the lowest level, so that safety would increase.

A Method for Running Nationalized Mines

Coal is a necessity. A public necessity should come under public authority. Coal mining should be considered as much a public utility as air, water, sanitation, the public highways, or the postoffice. Why should we permit people to make a profit from owning coal mines any more than from owning highways or the postal service?

Any plan of nationalization of coal mines must include democratic control. The miners who work in the industry, the technicians who administer it, and the public, must all be represented in the management. The plan of nationalization issued by the United Mine Workers of America in 1922, when it was still a powerful union, is one method that might be adopted. It included the following:

1. A Secretary of Mines in the Cabinet.
2. A Federal Commission of Mines, to control budget and policy on the basis of continuous fact-finding.
3. A national mining council, to administer policies, with miners, technicians, and consumers represented.
4. The safeguarding of collective bargaining through joint-conferences.
5. Freeing production management from wage squabbles and sales problems, by making wages the first charge against the industry and therefore making wage measurement one of the functions of the Federal Commission under the principles of collective bargaining, which will be safeguarded by an independent joint wage scale committee.

Such a plan need not result in coal being any more expensive to the people who use it. By eliminating the wastes of the present disgraceful competitive system through a centralized control over all coal mining, it might even lower prices.

Neither would the plan use up all the income from mines, leaving no funds for further development of methods or for new equipment. The government could save part of its income from selling coal for re-investment, just as a corporation sets aside part of its income for a "surplus" account.

No Hope in a Policy Aiming at Less

The policy of the miners' organization for twenty years has been a policy of grievances and small demands.

It has been a policy of conciliation. Has this policy cured grievances? Has it obtained a decent American standard of living for the miners? It has not. It has not even kept alive an organization.

Some people say that we cannot have nationalization of coal mines without a 100% union and a big political labor party. Possibly, but on the other hand it is also true that we can never have a 100% union and a big political labor party without pushing and fighting for a program of nationalization of industry.

Our organization has been almost completely crushed. Those in charge say it is because of industrial depression. Yet the miners organizations in Europe survive and even grow stronger in the face of a worse depression than we have in America.

This is because the European unions have nationalization as the corner stone of

their program. The workers keep their faith in unionism in hard times because it stands for a logical principle. It gives hope to the miners.

No union and no political labor party can flourish in this country which does not understand that under capitalism there is no hope. The lack of a 100% union and a well established political labor party is not an excuse for failing to push nationalization. It is the reason why we must demand government ownership.

Nationalization of coal mines means:

Regular work at shorter hours.
Decent wages.
More air pumped into the mines.
Better and happier homes.
The end of preventable accidents.
Security, health, safety and freedom.

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